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CIA rehab job still unfinished

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Spies, double agents, moles, traitors. The superpower battle of the supersecret intelligence agencies goes on. It is a contest the United States appears to be losing too often.

The House Select Committee on Intelligence now accuses top US officials of being "almost nonchalant" about security breaches. The government is guilty of "dangerous laxity," charges a 41-page report just released by the committee.

Congressional investigators worry that Soviet agents are getting away with invaluable military secrets and intelligence data. From Washington to Moscow, the Soviets have reached right into sensitive US operations.

The House report reflects the downside of the current US intelligence picture. A number of analysts say the Central Intelligence Agency deteriorated badly during the 1970s - so badly, says former spy Ray S. Cline, that some parts of the US intelligence effort were "going down the drain."

In the past few years, however, morale and performance have improved under intelligence chief William Casey, who has just resigned.

Yet much work remains, and the damage mounts. The recent John Walker spy ring, which sold vital Navy secrets, is now believed to have inflicted billions of dollars of damage on American defenses.

The defection of Edward Lee Howard, who was hired by the CIA despite an "extensive history of using hard drugs," according to the committee report, compromised some of the most sensitive US intelligence activities in Moscow.

The defection of Soviet spy Vitaly Yurchenko back to the USSR in 1986 shocked US officials; investigators were amazed that Mr. Yurchenko was allowed to walk out of a Georgetown restaurant unnoticed by his CIA chaperon.

Sometimes Soviet efforts are discovered only as an afterthought. There was, for example, a glaring case in the US Embassy in Moscow in 1978. Acting on a hunch, an American secu-

rity expert punched a hole in a chimney that backed up to the embassy building. Inside, he found an antenna, apparently used by the Soviets for eavesdropping.

Before the Soviets realized they had been caught, the American official lowered himself into the chimney on a rope. At the bottom he discovered a small room chock-full of Soviet monitoring devices.

Retired Adm. Stansfield Turner, a former CIA director, cites that case in his book, "Secrecy and Democracy."

But experts say that, too often, Soviet snooping goes undetected for months or years, and American secrets of tremendous value are lost.

The newly nominated director of the CIA, Robert Gates, faces a mixed picture as he takes over as America's top spy.

Mr. Gates inherits a budget that has doubled (some say tripled; the actual figures are secret) since 1981. There have been improvements in almost every aspect of intelligence work.

The major areas of intelligence include analysis, collection, covert activities, and counterintelligence.

Casey was enthusiastic about covert action. Gates specializes in analysis. But all four types of activity are crucial to the CIA's mission.

There is little doubt that the two most controversial aspects of CIA work are covert action and espionage, or "human collection."

As one analyst puts it, covert action gives the president an option "somewhere between diplomacy and sending in the Marines."

President Carter didn't cotton to covert action, at least not until the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Then Mr. Carter's attitude changed.

President Reagan has strongly supported covert action, from Nicaragua to Angola to Afghanistan. But along with

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that action has come sharp criticism, especially from Democratic liberals.

Espionage also caused some Carterites to have moral qualms, and this dampened CIA ardor for human, on-the-ground efforts.

Human collection can involve payoffs to foreign officials, blackmail, physical threats, theft, and other activities that are normally repugnant to people brought up in a democratic society.

Casey quickly let it be known that he favored human collection methods. That "gave him a quantum jump" in performance by the espionage branch, one analyst notes.

Analysis remains the heart of intelligence work. Facts pour into the CIA from the espionage branch, satellites, listening posts, wiretaps, publications, and other sources. But it is what the analysts deduce from all this information that is crucial for the president and the Congress.

Says one expert: "Gates is the quintessential analyst," and that should ensure strong support for the analysis section in the next few years. But Gates isn't as well plugged in at the White House as Casey was, and there are doubts that Gates's analysis of the world scene will have the influence on President Reagan that Casey's had.

The fourth category of CIA activity, counterintelligence and counterespionage, is a supersecret area that remains very much hidden from public view. Only occasionally does a Walker case or a Yurchenko affair blow the cover.

There is one interesting difference in this area, however. Casey and Reagan, unlike earlier officials, decided to expose blatant cases of Soviet penetration. "Other Presidents just wouldn't do that," one expert notes. This has brought the problem of spies and traitors into public debate, a development some experts consider healthy in a free republic.